

THE PRAYER OF THE AGONY

BY

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He began to be sorrowful: he began to be afraid. We live today in a world so haunted by fear that this story of Christ's agony must be very close to us. Anxiety lies heavy on the heart of men; and on the lips of philosophers the very word has become a commonplace. But it is not only fear that we share with this figure in the garden. The most fearful thing about the world's fear is its hopelessness, its sense of *futility*, a futility reflected again by those philosophers for whom anxiety is an anguish from which there is no issue. Here, in the garden, he began to be afraid: and it was indeed a dread of the torments to come; it was indeed the burden of loneliness; it was the terrible sense of defilement, the even physical horror of the black waters of evil overwhelming him; but added to all this there was the knowledge that it would all to some extent be in vain, to some extent be futile.

If we search for a solution to the problem of pain we can hope to find it only in the tears of God, only in the divinity of Christ. God so loved the world that he was willing to allow the horror of sin, and the suffering that comes of it—why? Because then, by becoming man he could share in the suffering, and thereby could reveal to us the richness of reality, the deep mystery of love, in a way he could never otherwise have done; and so, in the end, we in our turn could become something deeper and richer than we should ever otherwise have been. And in this scene, which is ultimate love unfolding itself in what seems like ultimate tragedy, that answer is given, that love is given; and yet he was despised and rejected, he is despised and rejected; and for many it is as though it had never been, and for many of us Christians it is in practice as though it had never been.

And yet, though the sense of futility is woven into the texture of the agony, the agony itself is still only a moment in the Passion; and he approaches it not with hopelessness but with joy, and it ends not in hopelessness but in the ringing triumphant cry, *Consummatum est*, The perfect work is achieved; and there follows not darkness and emptiness but the spearpoint of light of resurrection, the new day. Nor is it merely that joy succeeds sorrow as sorrow had succeeded joy: this sense of futility is *creative* of what

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is to come. Without it the Passion would not have been so perfect: for love is greatest when it is stripped of all sense of achievement, all return, and is sheer naked self-giving. That is what we watch in the garden: the divine self-emptying which alone could annihilate the self-centredness of man. He was despised and rejected and left utterly alone, that his acceptance of his lovelessness and loneliness might deliver us from ours.

And as from the darkness of the garden there comes the light of universal deliverance, so it can be in our own souls. Watching with him, we can teach ourselves first a sense of sin, a sense of the reality of the evil that is in us. But we must not stop there. We take our sorrow for it, not to an implacable judge, but to the prodigal father of the parable, to the God who says, No matter when you come back, nor even *why* you come back, provided only you come back in the end there will be the music and the lights and the feasting to welcome you. And so out of the sorrow is born a deeper love; and Christ is comforted not only by an angel, not only by the love of those who have never rejected him, but by the sorrow of those who have, but who have then returned to him in greater love.

This sorrow then is creative. For it brings us to the point of self-knowledge at which we realise our own futility, realise that of ourselves we can produce nothing, nothing except deficiency and evil: but that very fact means that now we can begin to live and act because now we can stop hindering God, we can stop spoiling everything, and God can use us now because now we can lie still in his artist-hands and become tools for his purposes. The sense of our own futility thus becomes the first essential condition of any saving activity on our part.

And the same is true of the world as a whole. Once bring its futility to the feet of Christ and futility is turned into humility; and then the whole of God's redeeming omnipotence can flow in upon the world and quicken it to life again. And so, if only in this darkness, if only in sharing this sorrow, humanity can learn to see more clearly its condition, can go deeper and become wiser than to rest content with a sense of God without a sense of sin, or, far worse, a sense of sin without God, then out of that tragic sense of life which is modern man's burden and privilege it will fashion a new heaven and a new earth, because not God but sin will become alien to it.

II

Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . , how often would I have gathered thy children, as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wing, and thou wouldest not. The blindness of the Jewish people, the heaviness

ness of the apostles who could not watch one hour with him, these are paralleled by the apathy of us who are called his followers today. We are witnessing today, as Berdyaev wisely said, not a crisis in human history, but the crisis of human history. It is the spirit of man, the human personality, which is at stake. But the disciples sleep. Year by year these events of the Passion are put before us and we are asked to see their implications for ourselves and for the world; and you would say that no human heart could fail to be moved by them, to be spurred to energy and action by them. But the disciples sleep. Why is it so?

If, with sorrow in our hearts, we try to answer that question, there is a danger that confronts us at the outset, the danger of thinking that the word apathy means inactivity. It means something much deeper: a question not of action but of passion, of suffering. The disciples who slept had been upbraided by Christ as men of little *faith*. But faith is an attitude to a *person*: we believe not in a creed but through a creed: we believe in a *person*. And that means that the strength of our faith depends on our knowledge of the person. Living faith is loving faith: the kind of faith which is based not merely on knowledge about a person, but on knowledge of, experience of, a person. The Middle Ages learned from the pseudo-Denys the vital distinction between *discens divina* and *patiens divina*: it is not enough to learn about God, we have to learn God, to experience God. And apathy means precisely a lack not of doing but of experiencing. We, unlike the disciples, know exactly what was happening in the garden; but we shall go on sleeping as they did unless our knowledge about the facts becomes transformed into an experiencing of the facts. A sense of futility produces apathy, and apathy produces inactivity; but once change apathy towards Christ into sympathy with Christ, suffering with Christ, and then futility is transformed into humility, and inaction into the boundless energy and activity of the saints. So our Lord said to them, precisely, Watch and pray, lest you sink into death of soul. Watch: be aware, not with a cold, scientific appraisal, but with your heart, *patiens divina*; and then, inevitably, pray: for these experiences are inevitably then a living with God, a state of conscious union with God. Without this, no amount of energy or activity will save the world, because without this no amount of energy or activity can transform the world. Humanity is in danger of being killed from within by fear and hate; and the only thing that can conquer fear and hate is love; and the only thing that can fill the world with love is this sympathy with God, the daily experiencing, in prayer, of divine things, the daily sharing in the

life and love of God, the state of being, as St Paul put it, dead, apathetic, to sin, but alive to God, to love.

III

They came to a garden, and it was night. The little walled enclosure, remote from the city, the silvery olive trees, the disciples sleeping: everything is still. Stillness is the womb of all great achievement: the immobility not of inaction but of intense energy. It was wisely said: Nobody but a fool would mistake silence for empty-headedness; nobody but a fool would confuse the immobility of the monk with aridity and death of soul. But stillness is something that has to be *achieved*. We tend nowadays to think of silence as the privation of sound; whereas in fact it is noise that is the privation of silence. If we want to watch with Christ and live with Christ we must first learn to be still. Throughout the Passion there are these enclaves of silence against the background of noise and tumult; and the sound and the fury signify nothing but death, produce nothing but futility: it is the silence that is creative of life. Christ had commanded the waves, Be still, and they had obeyed him; man refuses to obey, and is lost in a whirlpool of noise and commotion that lead only to chaos. If we are to be saved from our futility we must recover the faculty of being still: must make an enclave of silence within our own souls.

He said to them, Watch and pray. We shall never live in that other dimension which is our true element unless we learn to be still, in that state of awareness we call prayer. Sometimes indignation is aroused by the suggestion that if we want to heal the world's evils we should pray: to sit still and do nothing, we are told, is simply to invite the evils to overwhelm us. But prayer, even the prayer of petition, is not asking God to do something for us while we remain idle; it is not the negation of activity; it is the essential condition of the only kind of activity which can ever drive out evil. Without it we can never hope to acquire wisdom or love; and without these, activity is futile. The sense of futility is indeed the price we pay for having lost not only the power to be still but even the desire to be still.

There are some, again, who see in this story a proof not of the power but of the purposelessness of prayer. Christ, they say, prayed that the cup might pass from him, and prayed in so great an agony of earnestness that his sweat fell to the ground like thick drops of blood; but his prayer remained unanswered. But this is to misunderstand the nature not only of Christ's prayer but of all prayer. He prayed, but conditionally, as we always must: Not my will but thy will be done. And the prayer was heard. St Luke tells us that

after his first prayer an angel came to strengthen him; and you can see the change wrought in him if you read in St Matthew the different words of his second prayer: not now the simple cry of anguish, Let this cup pass from me, but the fuller, readier acceptance: If this cup may not pass from me, but I must drink it, thy will be done. So in the stillness of prayer strength comes to him; so it will come to us if we watch and pray with him; and in that stillness too, and only there, humanity as a whole will find new heart.

IV

Father, if this cup may not pass from me, but I must drink it, thy will be done. Obedience to God's will is the keynote of the whole Gospel story. You find it at the very beginning, when Mary is told of her destiny: Be it done to me according to thy word. You find it constantly on the lips of Christ: My food is to do the will of him that sent me. Here in the garden, the agony, the struggle within him, is caused by the shrinking of his nature from what that will was to mean for him; and as here he prays, Thy will be done, so in the final cry on the Cross, *Consummatum est*, The work is completed, he is declaring the fact, the will had been done. Obedience is the keynote of the story because it is the essential fact in the story. Sin means the rejection, by human pride and egoism, of God's authority; and from our egoism all our troubles spring. Christ saves us from our troubles by reversing the process, annihilating egoism—and asserting true selfhood—by a total acceptance of God's will. But his obedience can be of value to us only in so far as we share in it. For us too God's will has to become the essential fact, and Thy will be done the essential prayer.

We have been thinking of the casting out of apathy and futility by the love that is learnt in stillness and prayer. But that love is the love of God's will. When we pray for other things it should always be with that condition; and when our prayer is not petition at all but simply the attempt to be aware of God, to be with God, still it is from a heart trying to love his will that it must come. But we must pray the same prayer explicitly too, as Christ taught us. We must pray it even though at first we cannot fully mean it. That in the end we may mean it more. At first there are many things we could not readily accept, things that would make us grumble and rebel. But if we go on praying the prayer as best we may, the area of our obedience will grow; and perhaps in the end we shall come to mean it wholly, and then we shall be saints: for indeed sanctity has been defined as simply 'willing what happens to us by God's order'. And meanwhile other things would be happening

in us. For it is this that would finally and inevitably give us peace, because it would give us stillness and serenity; it would annihilate anxiety; and so the futility and the fear would finally be driven out.

It would give us serenity; but not the inhuman serenity of the man untouched by human tragedy. It would give us the serenity of Christ when his prayer was over and he stepped forward to meet his betrayer and his Cross. Not the false serenity which blinds itself to the fact of evil; but the living and loving faith which knows that evil is not ultimate, that to live in God's will is to live in God's love and care, and that therefore whatever comes to us by his order is good and we need not worry but only try to bless his name; and that even though the threat of some approaching pain or sorrow fills us with terror as Christ's heart was filled with terror; still we can hope to find courage for it and achievement through it, if we pray as he prayed, Thy will be done.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread: give us the stillness of heart that will enable us to know thee, the courage and strength to love thy will when thy will is hard for us, the sympathy to watch with thee and share the Cross with thee to the healing of the nations, the love that alone can save us and make us live. Turn our hopelessness into humility, and so, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen.



THE SIMPLE SIGHT OF SIN

BY

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MOTHER JULIAN was able to resolve the conflicting paradoxes involved in the relation between the world and God because she had attained to that concrete touch by which the Spirit of God brings all into one. By the 'touch' of divinity the Spirit draws all the experience and ideas of a life-time into the immediate orbit of the single and simple reality of his being.

And what might this noble Lord do of more worship and joy to me than to shew me that am so simple this marvellous homeliness? (c. 7, p. 16.)

The holy woman had progressed from the simplicity of mere creatureliness which a man shares with material creation, in which